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ABSTRACT

It is agreed among most educators that the arts should occupy some place in the elementary school curriculum. Yet the fact is that a strong role for the arts has yet to be developed. This paper argues that at least part of the reason for why such a strong role for the arts does not exist lies in some of the widely held beliefs about the practice of the arts in the classroom, beliefs that can be labeled "myths." Some of these myths include, "The arts are good to have in a classroom because there's no right or wrong answer," and "The best way to teach art is to integrate it with other subjects." Five emphases are presented for improving arts instruction: (1) emphasize the aesthetic problem; (2) emphasize the medium; (3) emphasize the elements of the art; (4) emphasize the real world; and (5) emphasize alternatives. (DB)

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Teaching the Arts: Myth and Reality

by

Robert King

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Teaching the Arts: Myth and Reality

by

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Most educators I've talked to, from pre-professional students to practicing teachers, have wanted the arts to occupy some place in the elementary school curriculum. The arts are seen as student-involving and pleasurable activities which serve a number of purposes in the classroom. Nevertheless, there are problems. A special 1990 edition of *Newsweek* devoted to education quoted the National Endowment for the Arts' 1988 report, *Toward Civilization*, to the effect that "basic arts education does not exist in America. It is considered a nicety, not a necessity."

There are a number of reasons for this, some within our control and some well beyond it, but part of the problem can be traced to some widely held beliefs about practice of the arts in the classroom, beliefs I choose to call "myths." Consider the following:

It's good to have the arts in the classroom because, since there's no right or wrong answer in the arts, they give children a chance to be creative and are a welcome break from the other subjects. The best way to teach art is to have lots of new ideas and novel materials, and to integrate it with the other subjects.

These well-intentioned statements may seem to be as true as they are familiar. In

actuality, they are myths—dangerous misinterpretations which, in fact, weaken the rationale for art's place in the curriculum and frustrate the teaching and learning of the arts. The five myths incorporated in the above statement embody an attitude often espoused by the friends of the arts in school but one which gives aid, comfort, and some ammunition to its enemies. These myths, as well as a few helpful antidotes to current practice, will be discussed in this article.

MYTH #1: The arts are good to have in a classroom because there's no right or wrong answer.

An admirably liberal intention lies behind this myth, of course. One would not want a teacher to sneer at a drawing for not "looking like a dog" or a poem for being "silly." The arts are distinguished from convergent, right-answer activities because of the exploratory, individual, and divergent nature of aesthetic activity. But the myth, as stated, weakens the role of the arts in our schools.

Agreeing that there is no one right answer in the arts, we must still ask what, then, is there in the arts? Answers have included "It's whatever you want" or "It's however you decide to do it." I've heard these responses from students as well as general classroom professionals and, however well-intentioned such replies may be, they are unsatisfactory. They do not lead to anything connected to the issues or practices of teaching and learning.

The best response I've found is to admit that there's no one right answer but to ask what is the *question*? The arts are ways of discovering, posing, and solving aesthetic problems. In valid arts lessons, a problem is posed and opportunities are given to deal with the problem. If an arts activity doesn't contain a question to be answered in some way, a problem to be worked with and explored and

resolved, it is neither art nor teaching and learning. This applies to laissez-faire "free art" periods as well as to their opposite, the cutting and coloring of a pre-designed pattern. Both approaches fail to involve aesthetic exploration; they fail to involve learning.

MYTH #2: Creative writing and art is a matter of being creative with writing and art.

Few words have caused more problems in education than the adjective "creative" when it modifies the nouns of "writing" or "art." It is important to understand exactly what that adjective refers to.

Certainly, the general elements of creativity apply to the arts just as they do to the sciences, cooking, and advertising. These elements—often listed as *fluency* in generating a quantity of ideas, *flexibility* in changing categories of ideas, *elaboration* in developing or extending an idea, and *originality* in posing or presenting an idea—are very important for successful adult functioning in most endeavors and we should structure our classrooms to generate and reward as much creativity as we can.

But I want to suggest that this is not the primary meaning of the adjective when it applies to the arts. It does not refer to a quality in the person (I'm creative and here I am writing so I must be doing creative writing) but, rather, to that which is written or painted or played. James Britton has made the distinction between three forms of writing: writing "expressive" of one's own world (the forms of personal notes, diaries, journals, letters), writing which has a "transactional" function between the writer and the public world of an audience (forms of the report, the editorial, and the advertisement, to name a few), and writing which he called "fictive/poetic" (the forms of story, poem, song, and drama), these

last being the genres that essentially "create" their *own* world, neither the personal world of the writer nor the external real world of an audience.

The Americanism "creative writing" denotes what Britton calls fictive/poetic literature and his distinction helps us see what that phrase designates: writing which creates its own world. In the same vein, Suzanne Langer calls literature "virtual space" and music is "virtual time." The arts are creative because, by their nature, they offer us creations.

I realize that the writer, artist, or student engaged in creating such a world is also "being" creative, but if we focus on the nature of the world being produced rather than on the producer certain possibilities follow. Although there are worthwhile creativity exercises and effective ways to release one's inner creativity, no one can tell a student *how* to be creative; many people, on the other hand, can help a student create a world in paint or words or movement. Indeed, if this were not the case, if one simply sat down and "became" creative, there would be no particular reason to include such activities in a school setting. Without the emphasis on teaching and learning which a focused view can provide, the arts become aimless and purposeless, not worthy to be involved in education.

MYTH #3: Art provides a welcome break from the other activities in the classroom.

Encountering this dangerous rationale for the inclusion of the arts in curriculum, I have asked students and teachers what it is about arts activities that make them a "break," a welcome relief from the rest of the classroom experience.

Not surprisingly, the first answer given is often a version of Myth #1 and the second a version of Myth #2; I hope I have questioned

that particular statement enough. Other answers include the observations that arts activities are "hands on" and that there's a physical enjoyment possible in the arts which is often missing in other studies.

The reader can see what is happening here. The other subjects are missing out on, or purposely passing up, a number of powerful teaching and learning elements. Often, people who view the arts as a "break" from other studies have a fairly limited or traditional view of what those other studies should consist of.

Put bluntly, the other classroom subjects should avail themselves of those same educational opportunities. We should diminish the role of "right answers" in science or in social studies and promote problem-solving, investigation, exploration, and discovery. We should find hands-on activities for the unit on Africa, the study of weather, the explanation of a graph. We should work for tangible evidence of student work in the forms of products such as graphs, maps, oral histories and, yes, art works, poems, and stories. We should utilize student interaction in discussion and workgroups in all the subjects.

To want to keep the art period as a time of interactive, hands-on production without the interference of purpose or educational goal to serve as a break from academic subjects is to make the arts suffer for the sins of those other subjects and their traditional methodologies.

The arts are certainly distinct and distinctive in the curriculum as intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic pursuits, but they are not the exact opposite of every other pursuit combined. They are as complex and interesting as the other subjects and they involve both creative and critical endeavors, as the other subjects should. If we let math,

science, social studies, and reading provide their own "breaks," we can allow the arts to be disciplines in their own right.

MYTH #4: Creativity means new ideas and novel materials.

"Make it new," Ezra Pound demanded of poetry in his day and certainly one valid emphasis of the arts in this century has been the exploration of variety—the individual, the original, the unique, and the merely novel. This may be one origin of the myth that arts lessons should always keep one step ahead of the latest interest or involve surprising materials. But I suspect a more important reason is found in the previous myths. If art is treated as an activity with no problems posed and no answers possible in which individuals are supposed only to be "creative" as a break from the rigor of other subjects, the motivation for such purposeless activities must be found in other ways, often in the introduction of novel materials and new ideas.

This leads teachers, sometimes against their will and certainly against their productive use of time, to search out novel approaches to art activities. There is, of course, a purpose for variety in visual art as in the other arts. Having students paint with large or small brushes, or with sticks, or by blowing ink around through a straw can develop, when part of a well-planned art activity, an appreciation of the differences of quality of "line" in art. But the search for novel materials has led us far afield to such products as mosaics from breakfast cereal and sculptures of marshmallows and toothpicks. The unusual nature of such materials, though it is a "cute" and conventional unusualness at best, may blind us to the fact that little aesthetic activity is actually occurring.

Secondly, there is the matter of "new ideas." I know the pressures on teachers to come up with new ideas for arts activities and

some of that searching may be necessary, but often what is meant by the phrase is a new closed-ended, one-shot activity. There is nothing wrong with a teacher's desire to find new ideas for the teaching and learning of any subject but in the case of the arts two things must be noted.

First, this search for new ideas is accelerated by the traditional "do it once" approach. We seem to have a prejudice against repeating arts activities and, if we as teachers do not, our students will surely tell us "We did that last year!," with the clear assumption that such things do not bear doing again. In one way, this is an accurate perception. When art is not seen as a matter of creating a new world in a painting or story, when it is not seen as discovering aesthetic problems and solutions for those problems, when it is not seen—in short—as a matter of teaching and learning, there is little point in repeating the same activity. But a good test for an art activity might well be that it could be repeated the next day with as much, or more, learned the second time as the first. If the activity is a follow-the-rules project for making a pencil-holder, a scarecrow or a turkey—well, one only needs so many of those objects. If it is a worthwhile aesthetic activity, on the other hand, there are endless possibilities.

Furthermore, I think arts instruction by the most amateurish of us, which would include myself, will be strengthened if we realized what few "ideas" there really are in the arts. If we consider math on the elementary level there are, after all, only four basic "ideas": addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. By manipulating these ideas we can balance checkbooks, plan a trip, figure out how much paint is needed for a room, discover the volume of the school, and even determine if Mr. A. will get to his destination before Mr. B. Similarly, there are only a few "ideas" or

concepts in visual art, including line, shape, color, texture, and composition. It is by manipulating these ideas, these elements, that we can produce millions of variations in subject and style. If the elements of the various arts were recognized as the ideas or concepts we are responsible for teaching, we would not need to search out new materials for the sake of new materials.

MYTH #5: The best way to teach art is to integrate it with other subjects.

Many of us are constantly seeking ways to integrate the various subjects and fragments of the school day into a more meaningful whole. From the British integrated day concept to thematic units to the diversity of forms of holistic education, the integration of learning into a personally meaningful whole is important.

However, when art becomes the only subject to be "integrated," it is made more marginal, more secondary to other subjects, and there is a probability that the art activity will not be aesthetically valid or authentic. I remember a suggestion several years ago that a potato-printing activity be included with a North Dakota unit because of the agricultural and economic importance of potatoes to the state. Although such a printing activity could be used for valid aesthetic purposes, to suggest it only because it seems to be integrated into the subject matter is educationally shortsighted. One would not necessarily understand or feel anything more about art—or, indeed, North Dakota—as a result of this integration. Such activities become mere "things to do" and, in this process, become neither subject matter nor art.

Elliot Eisner warns that "when integration is aimed at, the special features of a subject are often compromised in the process.

On balance, I lean toward a stronger boundary strength for the arts in order to protect their special characteristics from being swamped by subjects often regarded as being more important" (Eisner, 1987, p. 15). Eisner values integration, coherence, and unity in the educational experience and he hopes connections can be made "as long as the values of art are not diminished in the process" and, I would add, the values of the subject matter as well.

Including a pattern for cutting paper snowflakes (and how many non-hexagonal "snowflakes" have we seen on classroom walls?) is neither the science of weather nor art. Even more individually oriented assignments—drawing a picture of a fiesta after studying Mexico—if they have no accompanying aesthetic instruction, will lead neither to a greater aesthetic understanding of Mexico nor to an authentic painting.

These five myths, then, taken singly or together, cannot be used as a rationale for the presence of art in the classroom or as a basis for aesthetic teaching and learning in the areas of the arts. As well-meant and sincere as they may be, such ideas put into practice actually and actively work against the educative value of the arts.

WHAT, THEN, CAN WE DO?

I do not have the space here, or the resources, to outline a model program of arts-production for the elementary classroom, but there are a few important elements common to authentic arts lessons. I will continue to discuss, as I have been, the visual arts, but the same principles apply to the creation of worlds in any of the arts. Basing instruction on the following five emphases will move any activity and any classroom toward more authentic teaching and learning in the arts.

1. Emphasize the aesthetic problem

This basic element resides in the truth that Myth #1 conceals—that there is a problem, a lesson, a point, a goal to be reached in arts activities, even if the goal is one of exploration. It is this problem or point that gives the arts their basic value, whether they are integrated into a particular theme or not; it is this goal that provides the basic "newness" of the arts, not in novel materials but in novel and individual problem-solving; it is this goal that sets the arts apart from other subjects, not because they embody the absence of the cognitive, but because they blend the cognitive and affective into an aesthetic form. It is important, therefore, to determine the problem or point of any particular arts activity. If it does not seem to have one, if it seems to offer only a recreational break for hands-on activity, it is not a valid activity for a learning environment.

2. Emphasize the medium

A look at the recent *North Dakota Visual Arts Curriculum Guide* (1987) gives us activities entitled wire sculpture, soap carving, weaving, quilting, stamped lines, stencil printing, and the like, a common approach of most art education resources. Each medium of art has its own style of speaking, and an activity is necessarily based on this style. The answers to an aesthetic problem are found in the characteristics of the medium. The *North Dakota Creative Writing Curriculum* similarly lists activities such as image poems and circular stories rather than, for example, flower poems or Halloween stories.

On the other hand, some art activities in popular magazines or even in teachers' resource files go by subject (leaves, snowmen, fantasy creatures), by season (autumn art, winter art, spring art) or, worst of all, holidays. There can be no meaningful arts-production in the class-

room if the impetus comes from without rather than from within, from the various media and techniques involved in the particular arts.

3. Emphasize the elements of the art

The particular medium of art in which one is working is connected to this third emphasis, the element of art. An extremely simple example is given in the *North Dakota Visual Arts Curriculum Guide*: an activity on "line shapes" suitable for kindergarten. In this activity, children are asked to:

- Take a long piece of yarn and make a shape on the floor that encloses space. What is your shape?
- Rearrange the yarn to make another shape.
- Take a piece of paper and draw a line so that it encloses a space.
- What shape have you made?
- Make more shapes.
- Color them in.

Perhaps no art activity could seem simpler, but there are many techniques at work here that can be applied to almost any activity.

One principle is that of practicing and looking. To begin with a flexible medium and to make several different shapes as an awareness-raiser, before anything "fixed" is done, produces a number of responses to the problem. The fact that the actual shape is left to the individual shows that individual responses are valued and yet the instruction to make a shape is a direction, an aesthetic problem to be solved.

In contrast to this activity stands the instruction to "Draw anything you want to" which, as an arts lesson, abdicates any aspect of teaching and learning. At the other extreme, the instruction to "Follow me and draw a big

circle. Now draw a smaller one on top. Then add two triangles for ears and you have a cat!" is also obviously not an arts lesson; it is a gimmick which goes against the principles of art as well as against the aesthetic energy and resources that children have.

Put succinctly, an art lesson should teach, or generate, multiple possibilities of learning, something about line or shape or color or texture or balance or composition, since they are the elements of art. It is as simple and as complicated as that.

4. Emphasize the real world

The real world certainly contains the imagination of the children within it, and some arts activities draw on this, the "What if?" questions that excite internal dreaming. Much more predominant, however, are those activities which connect the art with the observable world of the child. It is this observable world which is often missing in our classrooms. Once we realize that we have children drawing and painting flowers without an opportunity to observe flowers carefully and closely, or drawing a house without the chance to actually study the lines and planes of a house, this absence becomes amazing. The use of a real model in elementary classrooms is as important as in secondary ones.

A second grade teacher of my acquaintance walked into her school and saw a bouquet of flowers on the secretary's desk. Taking a cue from one of her graduate classes, she borrowed the vase and flowers, took them into her classroom and used them as the basis for that day's art activity. My friend did not feel she was qualified to "teach children how to draw" but she was willing to take the plunge. She discovered that having the children look at the actual object and compare it to their own work afforded more than ample educational activity.

She was amazed at the intensity with which these uninstructed children drew, at their observational skills, at their individual trials and errors. The next time, she said, she would ask them to compare the height of the vase and the height of the flowers and see how much space each would fill on their paper; this would eliminate the problem of one boy who began by drawing his vase to the top of the paper. Nevertheless, this was a beginning activity, and the boy immediately realized his problem and began again on a new sheet, having learned something that day.

So intense was the concentration, she reported, that when the table was brushed and one flower, which had been balancing precariously to the side, fell out, there were groans of dismay and alarm. It required some negotiating skills on the part of the teacher to get that flower back "right." Indeed, when I saw the results, one thing struck me: through all the varied responses, the thickness of one child's lines and the thinness of another's, the delicacy of this one and the brute strength of that one, there was that *vase* of flowers, each with that precarious bloom balancing off to the left. These were paintings of *that* bouquet, not just flowers in general and not the generic "daisylike" form most of us produce when asked to draw a flower. These paintings were of a moment which existed in that classroom and which exists no longer except in the paintings. These were images of the real and transitory world, held for our attention.

Frank Wachowiak deals with the ultimate bogey-man of the visual arts, the human figure, by saying that the posed model should be employed in art class at *every* grade level. He provides focusing questions for the teacher, the kinds of questions my teacher-friend will no doubt use the next time: What portion of the model do you see from where you are? How large is the head in comparison to the body? How big are the hands? Where does the body,

neck, leg, and arm bend? How far can the feet stretch apart? and others.

"As the youngsters draw," he advises, "encourage them to look at the model constantly, carefully, intently—tell them to get their eyes full! Caution them against rushing through their drawing, scribbling, or making hasty, random, meaningless lines. Remind them always to look first and then draw. Encourage making the figure large, filling the page with it, so that they can enrich it with many details, many individual characteristics" (Wachowiak, 1985, p. 102).

The activity Wachowiak describes shows how purpose and direction, how teaching and learning, are involved in an activity that requires problem-solving with an emphasis on the medium and the elements of art when brought in contact with the real world. Anyone who doubts the effectiveness of a model should ask students to draw a bicycle (in the usual bicycle-less classroom) and then, providing a real bicycle as a model, repeat the assignment. The differences between the two drawings, with no more intervention than that, will be instructive. When we ask for shapes in general (draw a flower) the students will produce shapes in general. When we begin to focus their attention on the specific complexities of the real world, we will get complexities and development in their art.

5. Emphasize alternatives

The last emphasis I would like to suggest is the production of alternatives and the conscious decision by the student-artist as to which course to follow: trying something in different ways and doing it more than once.

Speaking of collage, Wachowiak stresses that students should arrange and rearrange the parts of the collage before permanently adhering them to the paper. Similarly, our

North Dakota *Guide* asks kindergarten students engaged in collage to "arrange the pieces in a pleasing way" and then "rearrange them in another way." The child can only glue them down "when you have the design you want." Arrangements and rearrangements, practice drawings, quick sketches and the like all develop more observation and "intention" in the classroom art activities.

In the same way, doing something more than once is a valuable lesson in alternatives. Making two masks instead of one, or several blown-ink designs instead of one, and deciding which the child prefers and why, will lead to an increased awareness of aesthetic possibility and an increased appreciation of art and one's own capabilities.

CONCLUSION

There is always a lot more all of us can learn about our subjects and our methods, including the various arts, and I have not intended this essay to be a substitute for any of the excellent art education texts and resources available. I have tried, however, to suggest the dangers inherent in several often-voiced statements about the arts and their place in the classroom and then to suggest some basic principles to serve as an antidote for those statements.

Most important, to me, is the necessity of taking the arts as seriously as we do any other subject matter, as a matter of teaching and learning. This seriousness precludes us from resting on blithe assertions of the importance of individual creativity allowed in either a laissez-faire or overly-structured Friday afternoon art-making session. This seriousness is also, we must not forget, the basis for the joy and play of aesthetic endeavor. If there can be no serious learning in the context of a marginal and pointless activity, there can also be no joy

in its processes or completion. If our children are allowed to create alternative answers to problems with actual media and explore the elements of art in connection with their real world, they will experience the joyful seriousness which makes the teaching and learning of aesthetic production worthy of being included in the curriculum.

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